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SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN TRAIL: MARY WELAYAT STRESSES UNITY, STABILITY,  
SUPPORT FOR A/PRESIDENT

REF: 2006 ASHGABAT 1210

SUMMARY

1. (U) CAO and POL/ECON LES met with Mary Welayat officials on January 18 to assess activity in the lead-up to Turkmenistan's first multi-candidate presidential elections (Niyazov was the sole candidate in the 1992 election). City and welayat (provincial) officials maintained a consistent line on the public mood and the elections process and predicted that Mary Welayat will come out in droves to vote for Acting President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov. CAO's interlocutors seemed open in principle to cooperation with the Embassy programs, though powerless to commit to such cooperation without Ashgabat approval. Nonetheless, CAO was able to explain some specific Embassy programs and suggest further partnerships to district officials and government groups. END SUMMARY.

MARY: THE WELAYAT THAT NOMINATED FOR THE NATION

2. (U) BACKGROUND: During the 18th Halk Maslahaty session on December 26, all six of Turkmenistan's regions except Mary formally put forth two candidates and after discussion nominated one for the presidency. For reasons which remain opaque, the nomination of the Mary candidate was preceded and overtaken by the uncontested nomination of acting President Berdimukhammedov. The common assumption is that Mary was hijacked by Ashgabat's powers that be to endorse Berdimukhammedov.

3. (SBU) Mary Deputy Hakim Shirin Toychiyevna Akhmedova claimed to us that the Mary region's 305 representatives to the Halk had voted their heart "and for the nation of Turkmenistan." Akhmedova said that the Mary delegation had considered two names but that 99 if not 100 percent of them supported the nomination of Berdimukhammedov. Thus, when First Secretary of Turkmenistan's Democratic Party Onjuk Musayev interrupted the regional nominations to nominate Berdimukhammedov, Mary did not have a difficult decision to support him without further ado. (NOTE: Akhmedova did not give the name of the other potential nominee aired during the Mary's pre-Halk Maslahaty meeting; indeed, she even left unsaid whether one of the two was Berdimukhammedov, which some have guessed was not the case. END NOTE.)

14. (U) As of Emboffs' visit, Mary region had hosted appearances by five of the six candidates (the sixth has since visited.) Akhmedova took pains to emphasize that each candidate makes his campaign presentation under identical conditions and enjoys equal financial support from the national government, and that there is "no limit" to that support -- so that if a candidate wished to pay a second visit to Mary this would be covered. While the Mary Hakimlik did not anticipate further campaign visits, civic organizations are welcome to campaign on behalf of any of the candidates and to invite a candidate back to campaign.

15. (U) NOTE: The Chairman of the Central Election Committee told A/DCM on January 8 that the government will provide financial support to candidates that includes only one campaign visit to each region. Additional trips would then be covered at the candidate's personal expense. As of January 25 all six candidates have completed their stump appearances in all the Welayats, and the expectation is that what local media refer to as the nation's "campaign marathon" is now over. END NOTE.)

16. (U) While stating that there was no domestic polling agency or plans for public opinion surveys, Akhmedova explained that the people of Mary welayat solidly support Berdimukhamedov, through their Halk Maslahaty representatives, because of Berdimukhamedov's personal care for the region while he was working "side by side" with former President Niyazov. She said meekly "I don't know if it is the same for other regions but he has done great things for our region" and listed four major projects he supported: construction of the Mary welayat diagnostics center, construction of the new regional drama theater, renovation of the Sultan Sanjar Mausoleum (NOTE: This project was sponsored by the Government of Turkey, in cooperation with the Government of Turkmenistan, and ended in 2004. END NOTE) and the International Conference on the Fifth Center of World Civilization -- which focused on archaeological work at the

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ancient site of Margush. (NOTE: The United States is supporting restoration of Margush through an Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation Grant in 2006-07; the Government of Turkmenistan has never contributed funds for research or preservation of this site despite its cultural-political significance. END NOTE.)

17. (U) Akhmedova initially struck a mournful tone in the meeting at the Mary Hakimlik office, which also included the regional Election Committee representatives. She mentioned more than once that Mary residents hope above all for stability, peace and the recognition of existing international contracts and agreements. She also emphasized regional interest in agro-industrial development and said that, during his January 10 campaign visit to Mary, Berdimukhammedov promised to expand studies at the power engineering institute in Mary.

18. (U) Akhmedova became impassioned when describing how eager Mary is to see schooling extended from nine years to ten, physical education introduced into schools and emphasis placed on learning foreign languages and on international educational exchanges. CAO asked, theoretically, how much of a planning burden such a transition would be for Mary; Akhmedova replied that all the candidates support it, and Mary "is completely ready" to implement it because it would simply be a reversion to Turkmenistan's system as it existed only a few years ago. She emphasized that Turkmenistan's universities have already produced adequate teachers to accommodate increased hiring, and that the transition would be gradual, though accomplished within a year. CAO volunteered that the Embassy would be eager to work with Akhmedova and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to implement joint projects to assist in or enhance this transition.

19. (U) As in CAO's previous visit to discuss the etrap level elections (reftel), Akhmedova was fluent in the legal regulations guiding this election process and referred to a display of newspapers, journals and books (including the Ruhnama) spread on the table to demonstrate that the government is trying its utmost to make all necessary information about the election process publicly available. Without being solicited, Akhmedova complained that Russian news sources were deliberately misconstruing events in

Turkmenistan; as example, she cited the claim that newscasters are not allowed to wear makeup. She deemed such claims ridiculous and trifling.

¶10. (U) CAO asked her and the MFA representative present whether there were any plans to allow in journalists to find out the situation for themselves, as there is intense interest in events in Turkmenistan. Akhmedova demurred that this issue was a matter for the MFA. Asked if she anticipates any foreign observers or journalists at these elections, she referred CAO to a handbook on the elections. (NOTE: On the same day, national Elections Committee head Myrat Garryev issued a statement that domestic elections observers would be sufficient for monitoring the election, and that in any event the Elections Committee had not received any referred requests for international observer participation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. END NOTE.)

¶11. (U) Prior to the meeting at the regional hakimlik, the regional head of the National Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, Sapargeldi Taganov, took CAO and POL/ECON LES to Oguzkhan etrap, where he led the etrap level election committee in a brief question and answer with CAO. The etrap election committee secretary was asked to speak and issued a series of statistics on the elections in Oguzkhan: Mary region has 13 districts (okrug -- voting districts; this term is only used in relation to elections). These okrugs include the cities of Mary and Bayramaly and 11 etraps -- with a total of 363 polling stations (uchastki) throughout the region. Oguzkhan etrap has 15 polling stations and a total of 13,850 voters -- 92 of whom are first-time voters. Two hundred etrap citizens have attended each of the five candidate meetings held in the region. "Anybody who wishes" can attend these meetings, and a different group of 200 has attended each meeting, according to Taganov and later Akhmedova. While the etrap has not completed compilation of voter rolls, local officials expect "very high" turnout for the election.

¶12. (U) Taganov appeared nervous and eager to end the discussion, which lasted no longer than 20 minutes, despite the 1.5 hour ride

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out and back from Oguzkhan for the meeting. After the hurried but substantive meeting at the regional hakimlik that followed, CAO was shuffled to another local government official. In contrast with the previous elections visit to Mary, this one seemed hastily arranged and disjointed.

#### KILLING TIME IN OGUZKHAN, BAYRAMALY

¶13. (U) The regional head of the National Youth Union Eziz Ataballyev led CAO to Bayramaly, where a Mejlis Deputy and the Bayramaly Deputy Hakim, Oguljennet Garlyeva, provided a brief tour of a local polling station. Polling stations are housed in government buildings, and the leadership of the given institute or group is generally the head of the polling station's own election committee. At the first station, an agricultural vocational school, the Mejlis deputy, as director of the school, was also head of the polling station election committee. He took CAO through the actual polling booth -- which, ringed in a green curtain, contained a small desk with a pen. Just outside the booth sat the transparent ballot box. Ataballyev said it didn't matter if voters folded their completed ballots or not before dropping them into the box. He also pointed out a seat with a sign indicating the spot for domestic observers to watch the election.

¶14. (U) The visit ended with a brief discussion between CAO and the school director. The school offers three sets of courses: six month, one year, and two years, and accommodates 870 students. The school offers computer classes; the directors anticipate introduction of Internet into these courses "soon." The school feeds into Ashgabat's Agriculture University. CAO later described to Garlyeva some Embassy programs of which the Institute could take advantage, such as English for Special Purposes or other curriculum specialists and trainers, and speaker programs.

¶15. (U) Garlyeva then accompanied CAO and POL/ECON LES to a second polling station housed at the Mary Water-Geological Expedition, where the Expedition director led CAO through the station and talked

about the Expedition itself. The Expedition members were sitting at tables with street names written on placards -- which will direct voters to which table they should register on February 11. (NOTE: Local officials have evidently paid close attention to the optics of the polling stations -- still nearly a month before election day -- and were eager to show CAO every part of it. The full polling station election committees were present at both stations to complete the picture. END NOTE. )

¶16. (U) The Expedition director seemed happy to have a captive audience to talk about his work and spent few words on the subject of the polling station or elections. The Expedition began its work in the early 1950s and has drilled to supply Mary and Lebap with four different types of water for drinking, medical (sanatorium) and agro-industrial uses. CAO described the sister-state relationship and recent efforts by the Nevada National Guard to connect with the Geology Institute and Desert Institute in Ashgabat, and encouraged the director to contact the Embassy to discuss further such cooperative research and exchange efforts.

¶17. (U) After the official visits, Garlyeva, Taganov and a large retinue of local officials accompanied CAO and POL/ECON LES to Merv for a tour of the Sultan Sanjar Mausoleum, a shrine and recently renovated mosque. Garlyeva seemed sincerely open to CAO's suggestions and became increasingly anxious to appear hospitable and open as the visit lengthened.

COMMENT  
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¶18. (U) Evidently Mary is taking meticulous steps to implement the electoral process for this first-of-a-kind (in Turkmenistan) presidential vote and, per our local interlocutors' accounts, will overwhelmingly back its favorite-son nominee, Acting President Berdimukhammedov. Congenial and fluent in legal and policy matters, Akhmedova could be a valuable partner in post outreach efforts after the elections, given her background in and support of educational and cultural programming.

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